



# The YUKON TRAIL

A TALE OF THE NORTH  
BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

—13—  
Holt Frees His Mind.

Macdonald whirled in his tracks. Old Gid Holt was leaning on his elbow with his head out of the window. "You better come and beat me up first, Mac," he jeered. "I'm all stove up with a busted lug, so you can wallop me good. I'd come out there, but I'm too crippled to move."

"You're not too crippled to go back to Kuslak with me. If you can't walk, you'll ride. But back you go."

"Fine. I been worrying about how to get there. It's right good of you to bring one of these here taxis for me, as the old sayin' is."

"Where have you cached the gold you stole?"

"I ain't seen the latest papers, Mac. What is this stuff about robbin' a bank and shootin' Milton?"

"You're under arrest for robbery and murder."

"Am I? Unload the particulars. When did I do it all?"

"You know when. Just before you left town."

Holt shook his head slowly. "No, sir. I can't seem to remember it. Sure it ain't some one else you're thinking about? How come you to fix on me as one of the bold, bad bandits?"

"Because you had not sense enough to cover your tracks. You might just as well have left a note saying you did it. First, you come to town and buy one of the fastest dog teams in Alaska. Why?"

"That's an easy one. I bought that team to win the Alaska sweepstakes from you. And I'm goin' to do it. The team wasn't handled right or it would have won last time. I got to mullin' it over and figured that old Gid Holt was the dog puncher that could land those huskies in front. See?"

"You bought it to make your get-away after the robbery," retorted Macdonald.

"It's a difference of opinion makes horse races. What else have you got against us?"

"We found in your room one of the sacks that had held the gold you took from the bank."

"That's right. I took it from the bank in the afternoon, where I had had it on deposit, to pay for the team I bought. Milton's books will show that. But you didn't find any sack I took when your bank was robbed—if it was robbed," added the old man significantly.

"Of course, I knew you would have an alibi. Have you got one to explain why you left town so suddenly the night the bank was robbed? Milton was killed after midnight. Before morning you and your friend Elliot routed out Ackroyd and bought a lot of supplies from him for a hurry-up trip. You slipped around to the corral and hit the trail right into the blizzard. Will you tell me why you were in such a hurry to get away, if it wasn't to escape from the town where you had murdered a decent old fellow who never had harmed a soul?"

"Sure I'll tell you." The black eyes of the little man snapped eagerly. "I came so p. d. q. because that side partner of mine Gordon Elliot wouldn't let me wait till mornin'. He had a reason for leavin' town that wouldn't wait a minute, one big enough to drive him right into the heart of the blizzard. Me, I tagged along."

"I can guess his reason," jeered the Scotsman. "But I'd like to hear you put a name to it."

Holt grinned maliciously and waved a hand toward the girl who was piloting the head of her lover. "The name of his reason is Sheba O'Neill, but it's to be Sheba Elliot soon, looks like."

"You mean—"

The little miner took the words triumphantly out of his mouth. He leaned forward and threw them into the face of the man he hated. "I mean that while you was dancin' and phillanderin' with other women, Gordon Elliot was buckin' a blizzard to save the life of the girl you both claimed to love. He was mushin' into fifty miles of frozen hell while you was fillin' up with potted grouse and champagne. Simultaneous with the lame goose and the monkey singstep you was doin', this lad was windjammin' through white drifts. He beat you at your own game, man. You're a bear for the outdoor stuff, they tell me. You chew up a blizzard for breakfast and throttle a pack of wolves to work up an appetite for dinner. It's your specialty. All right. Take your hat off to that cheechako who has just whaled you blind. He has outgained you, Colby Macdonald. You don't run in his class. I see he is holding his hand up again. Give him another half-hour and he'll be ready to go to the mat with you again."

The big Alaskan pushed away a fear that had been lingering in his mind ever since he had stumbled on that body buried in the snow yesterday afternoon. Was his enemy going to escape him, after all? Could Holt be telling the true reason why they had left town

so hurriedly? He would not let himself believe it.

"You ought to work up a better story than that," he said contemptuously. "You can throw a husky through the holes in it. How could Elliot know, for instance, that Miss O'Neill was not safe?"

"The same way you could a' known it," snapped old Gideon. "He phoned to Smith's Crossin' and found the stage hadn't got in and that there was a whale of a storm up in the hills."

Macdonald set his face. "You're lying to me. You stumbled over the stage while you were making your get-away. Now you're playing it for an alibi."

Elliot had risen. Sheba stood beside him, her hand in his. She spoke quietly. "It's the truth. Believe it or not as you please. We care nothing about that."

The stab of her eyes, the carriage of the slim, pliant figure with its suggestion of fine gallantry, challenged her former lover to his worst.

On the battered face of Gordon was a smile. So long as his Irish sweet-heart stood by him he did not care if he were charged with high treason. It was worth all it cost to feel the warmth of her brave, impulsive trust.

The deep-set eyes of Macdonald clinched with those of his rival. "You cached the rest of the gold, I suppose," he said doggedly.

With a lift of his shoulders the younger man answered lightly: "There are none so blind as those who will not see, Mr. Macdonald." He turned to Sheba. "Come. We must make breakfast."

"You're going to Kuslak with me," his enemy said bluntly.

"After we have eaten, Mr. Macdonald," returned Elliot with an ironic bow. "Perhaps, if you have not had breakfast yet, you will join us."

"We start in half an hour," announced the mine-owner curtly, and he turned on his heel.

The rifle lay where Sheba had dropped it when she ran to gather her stricken lover into her arms. Macdonald picked it up and strode over the brow of the hill without a backward look. He was too proud to stay and watch them. It was impossible to escape him in the deep snow that filled the hill trails, and he was convinced they would attempt nothing of the kind.

The Scotsman felt for the first time in his life old and spent. Under tremendous difficulty he had mused for two days and had at last run his men down. The lust of vengeance had sat on his shoulders every mile of the way and had driven him feverishly forward. But the salt that had lent a savor to his passion was gone. Even though he won, he lost. For Sheba had gone over to the enemy.

With the fierce willfulness of his temperament he tried to tread under foot his doubts about the guilt of Holt and Elliot. Success had made him arrogant and he was not a good loser.

When Macdonald came to order the start half an hour later, she was still asleep. "Give her another thirty minutes," he said gruffly.

Youth is resilient. Sheba awoke rested and ready for work.

While Gordon was untangling the dogs she was left alone for a minute with the mine-owner.

The hungry look in his eyes touched her. Impulsively she held out her hand.

"You're going to be fair, aren't you, Mr. Macdonald? Because you don't like him—your son-in-law?"

He looked straight into the dark, appealing eyes. "I'm going to be fair to Robert Milton," he told her harshly. "I'm going to see his murderers hanged if it costs me every dollar I have in the world."

"None of us objects to justice," she told him proudly. "Gordon has nothing to fear if only the truth is told."

"Then why come to me?" he demanded.

She hesitated; then with a wistful little smile, spoke what was in her heart. "I'm afraid you won't do justice to yourself. You're good—and brave—and strong. But you're very willful and set. I don't want to lose my friend. I want to know that he is all I have believed him—a great man who stands for the things that are fine and clean and just."

"Then it is for my sake and not for his that you want me to drop the case against Elliot?" he asked ironically.

"For yours and for his, too. You can't hurt him. Nobody can really be hurt from outside—not unless he is a traitor to himself. And Gordon Elliot isn't that. He couldn't do such a thing as this with which you charge him. It is not in his nature. He can explain everything."

"I don't doubt that. He and his friend Holt are great little explainers."

In spite of his bitterness Sheba felt a change in him. She seemed to have a glimpse of his turbid soul en-

light was none the less guilty. The heart of the Scotsman was bitter within him. He intended to see that his enemies paid to the last ounce. He would hurry them to the gallows if money and influence could do it.

None the less, his doubts persisted. If they had planned the bank robbery, why did they wait so long to buy supplies for their escape? Why had they not taken the river instead of the hill trail? The story that his enemies told hung together. It had the ring of truth. The facts supported it.

One piece of evidence in their favor Macdonald alone knew. It lay buried in the deep snows of the hills. He shut his strong teeth in the firm resolve that it should stay there.

The weather had moderated a good deal, but the trail was a protected forest one. The two teams now going down had come up, so that the path was packed fairly hard and smooth. Holt lay propped on his own sled against the sleeping-bags. Sheba rushed behind Gordon. She chatted with them both, but ignored entirely the existence of Macdonald, who followed with his prize-winning Siberian dogs.

Though she tried not to let her lover know it, Sheba was troubled at heart. Gordon was practically the prisoner of a man who hated him bitterly, who believed him guilty of murder, and who would go through fire to bring punishment home to him. She knew the power of Macdonald. With the money back of him, he had for two years fought against and almost prevailed over a strong public opinion in the United States. He was as masterful in his hatred as in his love. The dominant, fighting figure in the Northwest, he trod his sturdy way through opposition like a Colossus.

Nor did she any longer have any illusions about him. He could be both ruthless and unscrupulous when it suited his purpose. As the day wore toward noon, her spirits drooped. She was tired physically, and this reacted upon her courage.

The warmer weather was spoiling the trail. It became so soft and mushy that though snowshoes were needed, they could not be worn on account of the heavy snow which clung to them every time a foot was lifted. They wore mukluks, but Sheba was wet to the knees. The spring had gone from her step. Her shoulders began to sag.

For some time Gordon's eye had been seeking a good place for a day camp. He found it in a bit of open timber above the trail, and without a word he swung his team from the path.

"Where are you going?" demanded Macdonald.

"Going to rest for an hour," was Elliot's curt answer.

Macdonald's jaw clamped. He strode forward through the snow beside the trail. "We'll see about that."

The younger man faced him angrily. "Can't you see she is done, man? There is not another mile of travel in her until she has rested."

The hard, gray eyes of the Alaskan took in the slender, weary figure leaning against the sled. On a soft and mushy trail like this, where every footstep punched a hole in the loose snow, the dogs could not travel with any extra weight. A few miles farther down they would come to a main-traveled road and the going would be better. But till then she must walk. Macdonald gave way with a gesture of his hand and turned on his heel.

At the campfire Sheba dried her mukluks, stockings, caribou mitts and short skirts. Too tired to eat, she forced herself to swallow a few bites and drank eagerly some tea. Gordon had brought blankets from the sled and he persuaded her to lie down for a few minutes.

"You'll call me soon if I should sleep," she said drowsily, and her eyes were closed almost before the words were off her lips.

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